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Books & the Arts

### Reports from the Inside

George Packer reviews

Mating Birds. By Lewis Nkosi

Fools and Other Stories. By Njabulo Ndebele

Oppression, viewed from a distance, seems ideally suited to literature. A note of envy is often sounded in discussions of what André Brink calls “writing in a state of siege”, as if a crackdown on the *The New Yorker* or a late-night knock at Norman Mailer’s door might help produce our own Milan Kundera or our own J.M. Coetzee. Thus, earlier this year George Steiner warned that

The liberalities of the privileged West are no guarantor of true creativity. Where everything can be said, the writer is not, as Tolstoy proclaimed him to be, “the alternative state”, the compelling counterimperative of clairvoyance and of conscience. The “censorship” of the free and mass-market economies is wonderfully light compared to that of the East German or South African truncheon. But it corrodes, it trivializes.

But in South Africa, where the truncheon is a metal tipped *sjambok* and not a figure of speech, black writers have not been thrust into international prominence. Of the South Africans widely published and read in this country – Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink, Breytenbach, Fugard – all are white. The fact is that the struggle that’s come to obsess the West hasn’t produced its Garcia Márquez or its Soyinka.

Partial explanations arise: the inferior education blacks receive; the heavier censorship on them; the frequency with which they are banned or jailed; the necessity of writing in a second or third language and an acquired literary tradition; the necessity of mediating experience for foreign readers.

The black writer Es’kia Mphahlele has suggested a deeper reason:

I feel very gloomy about the situation as far as creative writing is concerned... Our energies go into this conflict to such an extent that we don’t have much left for creative work. One might ask, “Why could this not be a spur towards creative writing?” I think it is paralysing. As writers, we build up ready, stock responses which always come out in our writing.

Literature from inside a struggle can lose the ambiguity that often seems essential to good writing. And inside the struggle against an evil of such overwhelming magnitude as apartheid, the subject itself threatens to silence any normal discourse. On the one hand the

black writer comes from a group whose humanity has been denied; on the other he or she has to find a language for that humanity beyond the narrow status of victim that's been assigned to it.

The status of victim shackles one in another way too. The liberal white writer is an outsider, and in our literary culture marginality is a strength. But black writers are obliged to ask themselves with every line they write: "Will this compromise me as a member of the struggle? As a writer?" the writer can risk losing his or her black audience with art that appears self-indulgent, or risk turning that art into propaganda. No wonder so many black writers, prodded by the Publications Control Board and the Bureau of State Security, have chosen exile.

The problem is explicit in the fiction that came out of the Soweto riots. Those events shaped an entire generation of writers: "June 16, 1976 exploded in my face," wrote Mtutuzeli Matshoba whose stories collected in 1979 in *Call Me Not A Man*, were banned. They read less as fiction than as vivid distillations of apartheid's small-scale atrocities: a humiliating pass arrest, life in a migrant workers' hostel. The leading post-Soweto fiction – stories published in *Staffrider* magazine, Sipho Sepamla's novel *A Tide on the Whirlwind* – is concerned not with characters' inner lives but with putting flesh on the bones of a social problem.

Mongane Serote's fine 1981 novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, anticipates more recent work. Part I captures, in a lyrical first-person vernacular, the deteriorating consciousness of Tsi, a black journalist: "When man allows his heart to rot, we are capable of beginning to feed on the worms that rise, weave, create all sorts of patterns as they emerge from the rot. We can lick, and begin to enjoy their taste". But Part II abandons Tsi's point of view and follows the lives of a bewildering array of young blacks caught up in the Soweto violence, ultimately slipping into political aphorism: "The people of this country are locked in a tight embrace which is going to destroy them. The white people. The black people. The gold. The diamonds. The guns. The bombs." Part II seems to compromise with the need to be "relevant" – as if a despairing man's struggle to choose could have no relevance, with the revolution almost at hand.

Immerse yourself in the literature of this post-Soweto period and you feel as if you're hearing about black existence in South Africa for the first time. In a sense you are. Neither newspaper not television clips, neither interviews with black leaders nor the eavesdropping of white South African writers can prepare the reader for black life *from the inside*: the shebeens, matchbox houses, drinking and violence, township music, wit. Whatever literary demands for nuance they fail to satisfy, these works reveal a world. Yet exhaustion, as summed up by a character in Njabulo Ndebele's novella *Fools*, eventually sets in: "The obviousness of analysis! The lack of new insights! Old complaints uttered as if they were revolution itself!" The post-Soweto literature runs aground when it fails to go beyond or beneath the fact of oppression.

A decade after Soweto, two books have emerged that seem to mark a departure from the fiction of five years ago. These begin where the post-Soweto writing gets stuck; they move on from apartheid. A striking feature of both books is the almost complete lack of historical reference. In this indeterminate South Africa, a subtler fiction of subjectivity has a chance to breathe. Michael Kirkwood, editor of Ravan Press (distributed in the United States by Ohio University Press), the central forum for black fiction since 1972, told me: "It is one thing to live a reality, quite another to see it depicted. Since 1976 or '78 the debate has crystallized. There's less need now just to talk, to get everything out. Newer work is asking deeper questions, going into deeper terrains of culture – such manuscripts are being written even as we're talking." But a new approach leads to new problems; and part of the problem may finally lie in the Western readership that's proved so elusive for black writers.

Lewis Nkosi, a noted literary critic, wrote *Mating Birds* from a forced exile that has lasted a quarter-century. His antihero, Sibiya, a Zulu village boy brought by his mother to Durban, has been expelled from university for protesting segregation. He narrates his story from the prison cell where he awaits hanging: not for political activity, but for the rape of a white woman. Idle and empty in the sun-drenched streets of Durban, he begins a silent daily relationship with an English girl who lies provocatively close to the border of the Whites Only beach. They "use no words beyond the primitive language of looks and gestures," and as his obsession starts to poison him they act out a "degrading pantomime of sex" on opposite sides of the fence. He follows Veronica to her bungalow, watches her undress by a wide-open door, comes in, makes the pantomime real – all without the risk of language: "No speech, no pleas, not exhortations." The cops appear from nowhere and his fate is sealed.

*Mating Birds* feels like the work of a superb critic. Heavy with symbolism, analytical rather than dramatic, it attempts nothing less than an allegory of colonialism and apartheid, one that dares to linger in complexity. Dr Dufré, the Swiss criminal psychologist who pries Sibiya's story out of him "for the augmentation of scientific knowledge", wants to hear the Freudian family saga, the psychopathology of this one man. But Sibiya's tale eludes the doctor's formula; at heart this case history is political. "What in the end can we say to each other, this white man and I," thinks Sibiya, "that can break the shell of history and liberate us from the time capsule in which we are both enclosed?" For Sibiya, the crucial moment came after a fairly happy village childhood when his mother pushed him into the Lutheran seminary school: "The truth of the matter is, I am lost. To be more precise, I'm doubly lost. Unlike my father, I believe in nothing, neither in Christian immorality nor in the ultimate fellowship with the ancestral spirits".

His own experience appropriated, he turns to the temptation of his oppressors; when he is rejected intellectually, what remains is a terrible lust. The urge to "discover the sexual reasons for the white man's singular protectiveness toward his womenfolk" drains his autonomy and self-worth. The sexuality that feeds on a rotting soul is infected with oppression; it can consist only of voyeurism, the sense that life is elsewhere.

Until very near the end, Nkosi's story succeeds in powerful passages: the sudden disruption of village life that comes with his father's death and the family's forced removal; the portrayal of his uneducated but ambitious mother, who slowly succumbs to the degradation of shebeen life in Durban; the desperate mood of young blacks "with a great deal of time on their hands and no idea of what to do with it." But the last pages can't meet the task that Nkosi has set himself.

The final scenes – the trial and the rape – present an almost insoluble problem. Nkosi has poignantly rendered a black's loss of self; but faced now with the harder task of finding a language for the white girl, the Other, he falls back on literary and political convention. Veronica turns out to be a stripper, and treacherous temptress – the "bait" Sibiya's old father had warned him about. Under the pressure of realism allegory turns into caricature, and Sibiya is just another victim. The language becomes stylized. At the bungalow doorway the narrator sounds like a highbrow pornographer. "While I was trying to recover my surprise at this incredible display, the girl began to undo her bra! Like the magnificent stripper that she was, Veronica's hands were quick, nimble. Through the diaphanous haze of vibrating light..." And at the end of the book he resorts to the language of the pamphleteer; South Africa is "a society that has cut itself off entirely from the rest of humanity, from any possibility for human growth."

The novel sets out to chart the hidden terrain of the oppressed, the link with the oppressor. But apartheid, dehumanizing oppressor and oppressed, is hardly available to the language of human complexity. Nearing its white-hot centre, *Mating Birds* retreats.

Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* attempts less and perhaps achieves more. It dwells on the sensations and physical details, the ordinariness of a township boyhood. But this boyhood is middle class: instead of ragged miners and sorghum beer, here is a world of schoolbooks, nurses, gramophones. The stories pit a boy's anxious desire for manhood and meaner streets against the burden of a bourgeois upbringing; in "The Music of the Violin" a mother's social-climbing ("This room is as good as any white boy's ... Kaffir children! That's what. Always ungrateful!") is exaggerated to produce a drama of conflict with her children, which reaches a climax when the boy refuses to play the violin for which he's been ridiculed by township *tsotsis*. The three shorter stories feel a little thin: without Nkosi's intellectual weight or the social context of the post-Soweto writing, they read smoothly but don't leave much behind.

But the long story "Uncle" and the title novella seem to me extraordinary achievements. In them Ndebele creates an imaginative world self-contained enough to be able to set off political reverberations far below the surface of the story. "Uncle", in fact, is about art and rebellion. The trumpet of an itinerant, dissolute uncle is used to subvert the middle-class conventions of his family. The uncle's arrival for a stay with his nurse sister explodes his young nephew's world: having an uncle means having a connection to adulthood, white

cities, jazz, women and the hidden world of spirits and musical secrets. Though the uncle is a drunk and a womanizer, he educates his nephew in a constant struggle against chaos:

When you are improvising you are free: Completely free. But I'm telling you, you've got to learn to be free. You've got to struggle hard for that freedom. You see, if I can give you this trumpet and say to you: play something, you'll soon tire of playing anything, because your playing will have no direction. Unlearned freedom frustrates; nothing elevating and lasting ever comes of it.

The uncle's life has cut him off from family and community; in some ways it is degraded and irresponsible. Rebellion has a price. But the uncle's resources for fighting are greater than the others'. And the meaning of his music is unmistakable: "I found my music too, and I try to smash things with it. And as the music smashes something, it builds something else."

"Fools" moves the stage to adulthood. The narrator, a middle-aged schoolteacher, meets a young man, Zani, on a train. They quickly size each other up: the student is the sort who "turn[s] everything into politics," the teacher one of the "masters of avoidance... [that] have been destroyed by their own fear of living." And within a few pages the central fact is revealed: Zani knows the narrator as the man who, years before, raped Zani's sister and embezzled church funds. The novella then plays out the fascination and repulsion between them.

The gulf between the compromised old and the angry young is a central theme in recent black fiction. In Ndebele's hands the balance of power shifts constantly. Without depicting apartheid until the end, "Fools" explores the distortion of personality apartheid creates. The teacher is "someone for whom atonement has become the very condition of life ... In fact, he no longer has any personality; for he has become atonement itself." But Zani's political consciousness severs him from township reality and nearly gets him killed:

He had become his books, and when he moved out of them, he came without a social language. He spoke to me in the same way he spoke to those children. Is that how he had spoken in the bar, and then got stabbed? I wondered if he was not another instance of disembodiment: the obscenity of high seriousness.

The teacher craves Zani's youthful commitment, Zani the teacher's connectedness to his pupils and to his wry, bitter wife. In a violently farcical denouement, the teacher submits to a *sjambokking* by a Boer (the only white to appear in the collection) whose blows were meant for Zani. There's no triumph in his last words to Zani, but at least there is the painful hope that self-knowledge allows:

I have grown up to this point in my life, and there is not a single piece of the world in my hands. And you; you are too young to have it in your hands no matter how much you can claim to know it. That will come with time. You have your whole life to learn from.

Ndebele is writing about the recovery of a self outside the terms set by apartheid. Every page is political, but the profundity of his best work comes quietly, and this kind of writing carries a risk. Halfway through *Fools* you might want to throw it aside and say, "This man's country is burning and he's telling me about a boy who's ashamed of his violin!" The thought occurred to me. We have an insatiable appetite for words about South Africa; yet these black voices are barely beginning to be heard. And do we really want to hear them? The dreary details of township life, family interiors that are neither comfortable familiar nor excitingly exotic, language that sounds a little stiff? None of this fiction, not even Ndebele, reads easily. You can't finish it off like a news report over breakfast.

It may be that our political and literary biases have got Nkosi, Ndebele and the others in a trap. We have a political conception of South Africa which boils down to "apartheid" and "amandla"; we also have literary tastes which tend to detachment and minimalist fragments. If you put the two together – if Mtutuzeli Matshoba wrote about Soweto like Amy Hempel – no one here would read past page two. When we have a hearing about South Africa our blood is up; a Tutu speech or a dispatch about forced removals from Crossroads is, in a perverse way, more satisfying than the subtle nuance of an Ndebele story. We want to have our sense of the moral clarity affirmed; but when we get this in fiction, it jars our literary sensibilities with the tinny sound of propaganda. Writing from the townships is bound to be doubly strange – as literature, as politics. It is not going to tell us what we already know, in words we recognize. *Mating Birds* has a figure for the foreign reader in the Swiss doctor Dufré, who comes every day to hear Sibiyá's story:

To Emile Dufré and the rest of his brotherhood, I feel I am nothing more than a specimen of a socially malfunctioning individual whose name may yet figure in the growing annals of sexual crimes. Of my actual personality of my roots and the meaning of my past, of the subtle and complex emotions that the merest recollection of the landscape of my childhood is still capable of evoking, Dufré is woefully ignorant. And yet! And yet every day I look forward to his visits.

What's in these visits for the foreign reader? The shock of non-recognition, the challenge of personality and emotion that this fiction offers.